Tells the Facts and Names the Names

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India Journal

Travels with Sainath

By ALEXANDER COCKBURN

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Mumbai's an old-style airport, unlike Hong Kong's, which is the last word in modernity, where you can rent a cubicle, have a shower or a snooze and fancy yourself an upscale member of the traveling classes. Here in Mumbai I meet Sainath, and off we go in a diesel Toyota taxi; I a little light-headed from all those hours in the air from San Francisco.

Sainath's the reason why I'm in India in the first place. He'd said that if I came and gave "a couple of talks", he'd guide me round Mumbai, Delhi, Chennai and northern Kerala.

The talks turned out to be more than two, and the schedule was grueling at times, but how can one turn down such an invite like that from a man who in the estimate of many upheld the genuinely glorious traditions of Indian journalism in the years when "economic reform" burst upon India, at which point much of the Indian press began to nosedive into idiocy, mostly consisting of hero worship of India's dot com magnates, of rich people in general, of India's film stars.

It's true, the Indian press, like Indian politics, is not yet entirely degraded into the lunar desert of American politics and American media, which are now not less than 85 per cent hagiography in the service of the rich and the film industry.

In India, there are left-wing parties that count for something; mass movements that politicians have to pay attention to; some newspapers and magazines with principles, (though not the *Times of India*, now a fanzine about the film stars, cricketers and the very rich). Above all there are several hundred million people, the bulk of them extremely poor, who believe in exercising the sanction of their vote and who delight in confounding the prophets and casting down the mighty. It happened last year, when – against all predictions – the fundamentalist coalition headed by the BJP was turned down and the Congress coalition, much to its surprise, trotted back into power.

The taxi lurched into Mumbai and Sainath plunged into a description of the vast city, displaying the usual pride of any local for the scale and vulgarity of his city's civic corruption. The concrete and real estate lobby runs the place. There's a lot of money to be made in overpasses ("flyovers") so Mumbai roads rise and fall with dolphin like frequency. Fifty-one per cent of the population lives on the street or in slums.

He takes me to the Royal Bombay Yacht Club, still a genuine club. It's a nice old place looking out at the great harbor arch done by Lutyens, the Gateway of India, and a statue of Shiva. It's the strongest whiff of Raj-dom I get in my whole trip, much to my relief. Across India I saw many less souvenirs of Empire than I'd feared I would. My room is 50 feet long, divided into a bedroom and a study area with 20-foot ceilings. The Gateway of India is right in the middle of my view. Then, joined by Priyanka, one of Sainath's former students, a tv producer finishing up a documentary on Mumbai's old textile mills, now being converted into modern malls, we go over to the big 5-star Taj Hotel "coffee shop", a dignified dining room with an okay Indian buffet.

Sainath pronounces himself not hungry and then – this became fairly familiar in the next few weeks – discovered enough appetite to overwhelm vast platters of rice. He explains that if it wasn't for Joe

A Note on This Special Double Issue

Co-Editor Cockburn writes: This double-issue Indian Diary is late and many CounterPunchers, particularly new subscribers, have been phining (a new coinage, indicating querulous telephone calls) and emailing to ask what's going on. I could blame it on some exotic Indian disease. In the late nineteenth century Marcel Proust's father, a fashionable Parisian doctor, wrote a book presaging doom for Europe from Indian and other Asian plagues. But actually cholera went the other way. In this case, blame it on flu, in a ferocious Humboldt county strain which has laid low some of our doughtiest marijuana growers. Though no cultivator, nor even disciple, of the herb, I had a terrible bout of this through most of May, and only crawled from its fierce shadow at the very end of the month. For the next two issues we'll play catch up and soon we'll be back on schedule.

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Kennedy he might not be here. Sainath's maternal grandfather was V.V.Giri, a left Indian nationalist who became one of India's most respected political figures. Around 1915, Giri had traveled from his home state of Andhra Pradesh to Dublin to study law.

He was in close touch with the men planning Dublin's Easter rising, most notably the revolutionary socialist, James Connolly. His connections were frequent enough for him to have come under serious suspicion by the British occupiers. With the Rising temporarily crushed, all the leaders were scheduled for execution, the wounded Connolly shot in a chair. But Kennedy and other influential Irish Americans intervened to pressure the British to release Eamon De Valera and somehow Giri somehow got spared on the same Irish-American nod at the same time, though he was expelled from Ireland three months later.

March 26

Sainath and Priyanka advised me against going out this morning since it's Holi, a day where rowdy fellows pelt you with dye and balloons filled with stones in honor of spring. I wander out at dawn and soon meet people whose faces and clothes are blotched with red and green stains. I retreat for the rest of the morning to the Club, whose guest board showed roughly a 50/50 split between Anglo and Indian names.

I prowl around the Yacht Club's library, mostly full of light fiction, but finally come across *The Indian Field Shikar Book*, compiled by W.S. Burke, sixth edition, published by Thacker, Spink & Co., Calcutta and Simla, 1928. Embossed on the flyleaf is "J.N. Tata", presumably once the owner. The Tatas are probably India's best known business family, now running a vast empire, having flourished down the years from their origins as opium concessionaires, just as Jardine and Matthiessen were further east.

I turn to a chapter called "The Game Destroyers". Burke advised that with the "marked decrease" in game in several parts of India "it has become urgently necessary for sportsmen to turn their attention to the game destroyers of India". Conservation is the order of the day.

And what are these "natural foes"? Burke entertains no uncertainty on the matter.

"The leopard is one of the greatest foes to the preservation of deer which, largely owing to his depredations, have been almost, if not quite, exterminated in many parts of India… and of all the leopards the Ounce or Snow Leopard (*Felis unca*) is the most inveterate and successful destroyer of the game to be found in the higher elevations of the Himalayas".

Below the leopard, Mr. Burke ranges the other game destroyers: wolves, wild dogs ("should be remorselessly destroyed"), civets and mongooses, martins and weasels, crows ("arrant egg thieves and chick destroyers"), owls "ditto"), eagles, buzzards, falcons ("usually deserving of a cartridge, though we must not forget that their partiality for rats, snakes and other small and noxious animals is a recommendation to mercy which should carry some weight".

But clemency is not Burke's preference. As regards all game destroyers he concludes, "it is fairly safe to adopt as our guide the Indian saying *'paihla lat, pichi bat'*, and slay first and enquire at leisure – if so inclined".

There are many pages filled with the various hunting regulations in force across British-occupied India and also the princely dominions ("officers shooting quail in season are prohibited from shooting them over dogs as that disturbs the partridges, and other game during their breeding season"). But the basic intent of all the fierce stipulations is obviously to target with imprisonment or costly fines all local inhabitants, many of them starving as a consequence of British exactions, and thus prevent them from feeding themselves and their families by killing game or catching fish.

There is a sharp admonition against halal ("Left to themselves natives performing this rite, will usually cut an animal's throat by slashing it from ear to ear close under the jaw, utterly ruining the head for mounting"). For snakebite Burke is a keen advocate of "Fitzsimmons' Anti-Venomous Serum", developed by the director of the Port Elizabeth Museum in South Africa, citing claims that this serum "has never failed".

When I tell Sainath later about Fitzsimmons' serum, he remarks that he'd written an article back in 2001 on a new epidemic of snakebites in rural India, courtesy of the economic "reforms". Among the consequences of the "reforms" is that electric power for farmers is released at odd times, like 3 am. If the power goes on at 3am, then someone has to be out in the field to switch on the pump and monitor the flow. But this pre-dawn hour is when the snakes are out chasing rats. Snakes need water too, as do wild boars and kindred wild life. By late 2000, peasants were being bitten and gored in unprecedented numbers, and some have had to spend a fortune for treatment including the increasingly expensive serum which guerillas in the forest like the Tamil Tigers also need in large amounts.

Sainath, full of bitter denunciations of Indian food in America, takes me off to a Mughalai restaurant. He has butter chicken. I choose mutton curry. Despite Sainath's acrid dismissal of all Indian restaurants in the U.S. they taste pretty similar to a decent Indian meal on 6th street in New York, though Sainath's butter chicken was over-salted. With some diligence you can find good North Indian food in most major American cities. Southern Indian food is another matter. How I will miss southern Indian cafes and restaurants. How I will yearn for the dosais (crepes or pancakes), the idlis (steamed cakes), both made from a mix of rice grits and urad dhal fermented overnight. I will pine too for fish and shrimp curries, for oothappam (onion pancakes) and rasam (thin soups) of which one popular one is the Tamil *milagu-thannit* (literally, pepper water), rendered as "mulligatawny" by the Brit-

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ish and thickened into the brackish brown sludge served in clubs and British Railway hotels in the 1950s.

Sainath says he puts on two kilos every time he visits Kerala, and I can see why. I miss the thali too, a stainless steel tray about the size of a pizza platter on which the smaller bowls of vegetable curries, curd, desserts and other elements of the thali palette are set and refilled until you're done. Why is there almost no southern Indian cuisine in America? After all, the motel industry may be 70 per cent run by clans from Gujarat, but there are a lot of Indians from other regions here too, including Andhra Pradesh which Sainath, with the pride of a native son, says proudly has the fieriest food of all.

Off to Delhi. The snacks on Air India are actually proper meals. Sainath and I settle into the Indian Institute for Mass Communications, whose bathroom plumbing makes Heath Robinson look like a Bauhaus designer. Sainath says such plumbing is a noted feature of the Delhi region.

I ask Sainath how he started working in the countryside.

At the start of the 90s Sainath was in his early thirties, born in a distinguished Brahmin family, educated by the Jesuits in Madras (a city renamed Chennai five years ago), then seasoned in the radical flames of Jawaharlal Nehru university in New Delhi. By 1980, he was at United News of India, and three years later working for R.K. Karanjia, a famous journalistic figure of that era and proprietor of the muckraking weekly *Blitz* which in the early 80s commanded a national circulation of 600,000 and a readership ten times larger.

Karanjia lost no time in making the teetotal and hard-working Sainath deputy chief editor. Soon Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, author of *Blitz*'s "Last Page" column, which he had written for over 40 years, willed the column to Sainath, thus trumping from the grave Karanjia's designated inheritor. Abbas, incidentally, was the author of the great novel *Inquilab* (Revolution), plus 72 other books, plus the scripts of many of India's greatest movies. A year later Sainath toured nine drought-stricken states in India, and recalls ruefully, "That's when I learned that conventional journalism was above all about the service of power. You always give the last word to authority. I got a couple of prizes which I didn't pick up because I was ashamed".

Ten years later Sainath's moment came. "The economic 'reforms' began. That's when the great intellectual shift took place". Just as in the way in which the US press romped ever deeper into celebrity journalism as the war on the poor unfurled through the 80s and 90s, so too the Indian press plunged into full-tilt coverage of India's beautiful people. "I felt that if the Indian press was covering the top 5 per cent, I should cover the bottom 5 per cent".

He quit *Blitz* and in 1993 applied for a *Times of India* fellowship. At the interview he spoke of his plans to report from rural India – *terra incognita* to the national Indian press. An editor asked him, "Suppose I tell you my readers aren't interested in this stuff". Sainath, a feisty fellow, riposted, "When did you last meet your readers to make any such claims on their behalf?"

He got the fellowship and took to the back roads in the ten poorest districts of five states. He walked hundreds of miles. The *Times* had said it would carry a few pieces. He had two good editors there who supported what he was doing. In the end the paper ran 84 reports by Sainath across 18 months, many of them subsequently reprinted in his well-known collection, *Everybody Loves A Good Drought*. They made his journalistic name and earned him a bundle of prizes, both national and international. The prizes furnished him credibility and also money to go on freelancing.

In those days, Sainath remembers, the legitimacy of the 'neoliberal reforms' that plunged India's peasantry into the inferno "was very great, like religious dogma. But I was getting 300 letters a month from people applauding and ratifying my reports as well as sending money for the people I was writing about. It was very moving. I learned that readers are far ahead of editors. I was saying that poverty is not natural, but a willed infliction. I asked, what are the survival tactics of the poor? I saw that the Indian woman eats last. She feeds her husband, her children, the parents, and then if there's anything left she eats that. I learned how the poor lived off the forests. I did what they did. If they migrated and got up on top of a train, so did I."

For hundreds of millions of poor Indians, the brave new world of the 90s meant globalization of prices, Indianization of incomes. "As we moved to fortify our welfare state for the wealthy, the state turned its back on the poor, investment in agriculture collapsed, and with it, countless millions of lives. As banks wound down rural credit while granting loans for buying Mercedes Benzes in the cities at the lowest imaginable interest rates, rural indebtedness soared. In the 90s, for the first time in independent India the Supreme Court pulled up several state governments over increasing hunger deaths. Welcome to the world so loved by the Friedmans – Thomas and Milton".

Exchange rates: in March and April of 2005 $1 US traded for about 42 rupees. In the Mumbai slums a bucket of water sells for 5 rupees, about 12 cents. 1000 rupees exchange for about $24.

From the mid-90s on, thousands of Indian farmers committed suicide, including over 5,000 in the single southern state of Andhra Pradesh. As employment crashed in the countryside to its lowest ever, distress migrations from the villages – to just about anywhere – increased in tens of millions.

Foodgrain available per Indian fell almost every year in the 90s and by 2002-03 was less than it had been at the time of the great Bengal famine of 1942-43. Even as the world hailed the Indian Tiger Economy, the country slipped to rank 127 (from 124) in the United Nations Human Development Index of 2003. It is better to be a poor person in Botswana, or even the occupied territories of Palestine, than one in India.

Few journalists write well about poor people, particularly the rural poor, who have mostly vanished from public description or discussion. Reporters tend to patronize them. The drama is really about the journalist visiting the poor, (whose categories include several hundred million

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Indians, ranging from destitute itinerants to small farmers crucified by debt). Interviewing the poor as they reel off numbers from the balance sheet of their misfortunes takes concentration. The devil, in recent years often meaning suicides, is in details that have to be got right: inputs per acre, sources of irrigation, market price for crops. These numbers have to be jotted down in the fields, often in temperatures upward of 110F, and even 118F, at which point all electronic equipment gives up.

It's necessary to keep good records. When we visited the family of a dalit (i.e., an untouchable), Sainath gave me the standard form he has designed and filled out for the 300 or so families he's personally visited after a suicide. Name: T.T. Johny, aged 43. Date of suicide: July 9, 2004. Debt: 60,000 rupees. Family members: one wife, one daughter. Land: one acre. Cattle, none. Crop seed changes.., Sources of credit… Source of irrigation: no well. Input per acre…

Sainath respects the people he writes about. On first encounter, he makes a point of drinking the glass of water they put in front of him, no matter how cloudy or suspect in origin. He cares about them, stays in touch with them, tries to get them money. He doesn't see poverty as a "condition", but as the consequence of decisions by people, businessmen, politicians, World Bank officials, economists ensconced in some distant Institute for Development Studies. He sees poor people as intelligent actors, well aware of the instigators of their misery, marshalling their tiny resources in the daily search for work and food.

Nothing could be further from Oxfam portfolios than Sainath's photographs of his subjects in the Indian countryside, which he recently took with him on a speaking tour in the U.S. and which he is preparing for displays across India. These photographs don't have the slightly stagy drama of, say, a portfolio from Salgado, but they have twenty times more insight and respect. Rural work is hard to photograph. Take California. Have you ever seen a good photograph of a celery cutter in the Pajaro Valley, or a *limonero* on his ladder picking lemons around Santa Paula near Oxnard, or a *palmero*, a date picker, near the Salton Sea?

The American documentarists of the 30s opted for cartoon stereotypes, preferring the easier and less seditious task of presenting migrants as inert victims. You can see from her contact sheet that Dorothea Lange chose the most beaten-down image of the famous migrant mother. It was Lange, so the contact sheets show, who herded children around the woman (actually 100 per cent Cherokee) to make it look as though she was burdened with a vast brood and who passed over more animated images of the same woman. Sainath's subjects always look alive and even cheerful. They are still significant actors in the larger political drama being fought out in India today. In the U.S. most of the Farm Security Administration's photographers of the 1930s preferred despondency to defiance. Were there no Okie camps with laughing children? Of course there were, but Walker Evans didn't circle those images on his contact sheets, though I'm told the Farm Security Administration has a bunch of color photos of migrants on file it would be worth inspecting.

March 27

On to Agra (250km) and the early palaces and mausoleums of the Mughals. We hurtle along in a small Tata car, with Sainath's friend JP, Jayaprakash, and a driver. Rural roadside Indian flashes by. The north Indian landscape here is flat, with wheat sheaves stacked. Everything looks half built and half ruined. Vespas and small motor bikes carry the male driver, with a woman and one child pillion. There's often another child up front on the handlebars. The saris are like glorious butterflies everywhere one looks. On we go towards Fatehpur Sikri along the narrow road carrying buses and all bound for India's premier tourist attraction.

We get a flat and while we're having it fixed by a fellow with a compressor at the side of the road there's a crash as a 2000 Ambassador (India's warhorse diesel sedan, looking a bit like a 54 Pontiac) tries and fails to squeeze through two tractors. We see it forty yards down the road with its side bashed in. It's the only metal carcass I see, which is astounding because Indian driving is entirely terrifying, and I have strong nerves in this department. I have a photograph of our car overtaking a bus in the narrow main street of a small town, and ahead of us, rapidly approaching, another car, overtaking a truck. This is standard.

Akbar's Fatehpur palace is a marvel in sandstone, like a Utah landscape conjured into sixteenth-century Mughal architecture, robust, imperial, yet delicate. It's certainly one of the most beautiful palace complexes I have seen, without the endless dreary frontages of Vienna or Versailles, with graceful little temples and pools and then vast colonnades, with parasol-like pavilion roofs lightening the rooflines.

Off to Agra town for lunch before our visit to the Taj Mahal. We go to a vegetarian restaurant, thali-style. Sainath spots a publisher looking patriarchal with his family. He wrote a style book. I hope he defended the semi-colon and other cherished values of an age now gone.

Over lunch we start talking about the whole acrid debate about the consequences of British rule. Sainath cites the Madras-based economist C.T. Kurien (in *Global Capitalism and the Indian Economy*, 1994) on one consequence of the US Civil War. Later I look it up in Sainath's copy.

"The rapidly growing cotton textile industry of Britain had initially depended upon raw cotton from its colonies in America, but after these colonies declared themselves to be the United States of America, British industry lost the power to get cotton on its terms. Subsequently, the Civil War in the United States resulted in a sudden interruption in the supply of cotton to Britain and a frantic search started for an alternative and more dependable source. Demand for cotton from India suddenly shot up; the export of cotton from India to Britain increased from around 500,000 bales in 1859 to close to 1,400,000 bales in 1864. From then on the commercialization of agriculture continued to gain momentum: between the last decade of the nineteenth century and the middle of the twentieth, when food production in India *declined* by 7 per cent, production of commercial crops increased by 85 per cent.

"There was, consequently, some increase in overall agricultural production, but a growing population could not use the commercial crops as food. Widespread and recurring famines became a regular feature during this period. However, those who had the land and other facilities to take advantage of the demand for commercial crops must have become much wealthier. Capitalism was performing its role of enriching some and impoverishing many."

In other words, the Civil War helped install recurring starvation on the Indian calendar.

We head towards the Taj Mahal, built

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by Shah Jehan for the dearest of his wives, Arjumand Banu Begum, whom he married in 1612 and who died bearing their fourteenth child in 1631. Shah Jehan took it hard, remaining in seclusion for two years and emerging with spectacles and gray hair. He spent twenty years supervising the construction of the Taj Mahal, joining her in the mausoleum 35 years later, having been imprisoned for a number of years by his son, Aurangzeb.

There's a split rate for Indians and foreigners, which seems sensible: 15 rupees for the former and 110 (about $2.60) for the latter. The crowds are large, but without the air of sullen resignation, amplified by the gross corpulence conspicuous in American crowds in Disney World and other attractions. The children are spirited and the mothers animated. In all my journeys I neither saw a really fat Indian nor a skeletal one, of the sort enshrined in Oxfam posters, even though we later visited several homes with families so poor that the man of the house had killed himself from shame at the inability to pay off his debts to the banks and to moneylenders. As Sainath stresses, though you can see emaciation in the slums of Mumbai, most hunger is invisible and has been swelling since liberalization began in the early 90s. Sixty-seven per cent of Indian kids are malnourished. They take in 600 calories a day when they used to get 900.

I've never cared for the Taj Mahal, depicted on the biscuit tins of my childhood. And after seeing Akbar's first palace compound at Fatehpur Sikri, I feel this more strongly. Kitsch is emotional blackmail and the Taj Mahal, blaring Shah Jehan's bereavement, seems to me the very essence of kitsch. Part of the problem is Shah Jehan's snobbery about red sandstone. Both here and a mile up river at the Fort he ordered white marble and in the case of the Taj Mahal the result is a sort of airless sterility. The manic symmetry amplifies this. Also, the Taj Mahal is just too big. Akbar's tomb, a few leagues back down the road towards Delhi, though large, seems proportionate. But the vast Taj Mahal diminishes its skeletal contents, ensconced in two sarcophagi at its core. Shah Jehan was locked up by Aurangzeb in the Fort, a mile upstream, and spent many years looking down the river at his wife's mausoleum, apparently squinting in a little piece of mirror at night to catch the reflection. When he died Aurangzeb shipped him downstream to join Arjumand in the comity of the sepulcher, though symmetry is for once controverted since his stone coffin is slightly larger and higher than hers. These days the river is shallow and dirty. In the mid seventeenth century it was clear and twenty feet deep.

On the way home Sainath starts reminiscing about Karanjia, the famous owner of *Blitz*. Karanjia was an owner-editor who plied his trade with élan. At the dawn of the Cuban revolution he traveled to Havana where the new government took him to be the new Indian ambassador and, gratified with such diplomatic recognition, gave Karanjia the red carpet, including an interview with Fidel. Finally, after three weeks, Karanjia disclosed that he was not the ambassador but a journalist and there was a momentary chill, soon dispelled.

For Karanjia, said Sainath, impact was everything. *Blitz*'s stories had sizzle and the phones burned with powerful people howling libel threats down the lines. Death threats came too, in such profusion that reporters would solemnly request the callers to postpone their homicidal visits for a day or two owing to the length of the line of people preparing to exact retribution. The Hindu fundamentalists in Shiv Sena (Shiva's Army)got mad enough one time at a slur in the humor column that they sent a mob from out of town to burn three of *Blitz*'s delivery vehicles and break office windows. Karanjia was away at the time and Sainath, who'd let the humor column through without reading it, quaked at news of his return.

When he saw his burned trucks Karanjia trumpeted his dismay and Sainath, taking full responsibly, was under heavy fire until Karanjia noticed *Blitz*'s business manager, an elderly Parsee, looking undismayed. So, Karanjia, asked him, were the trucks insured? No, said the manager, still calm. Then the glorious truth came out. The trucks had been rented from the local Shiv Sena outfit, whose capo soon appeared at *Blitz*'s office distraught at his dilemma. He could not, he told Karanjia, get compensation from the arsonists since they had been sent from out of town by Shiv Sena's supreme commander. Karanjia told him he could offer no satisfaction.

Somewhere in the late 60s a guru made the rounds of India, saying that his spiritual powers enabled him to walk on water. And so he could, with the assistance of a German engineer who had designed a tank with a span of fiber glass rope just under the surface, along which the guru would pace, to the amazement of the rubes.

Karanjia announced that *Blitz* would sponsor a demonstration by the water-walking guru in a local auditorium. He ordered an extra big tank to be fabricated. Seeing trouble ahead, the German engineer made a prudent exit. In front of an excited crowd the guru faltered to Karanjia that the commotion was impinging on his powers and diluting the cosmic forces. "You'll walk on water or I'll break your legs", Karanjia shouted. The trembling guru stepped off the edge of the tank and sank like a stone. When he'd dried off, Karanjia told him to try again. Once again the guru stepped and sank and fled into the night. Karanjia's staff worried that the crowd would want its money back but Karanjia wouldn't hear of it. "They have had their money's worth", he crowed. "They're happy".

The American documentarists of the 30s opted for cartoon stereotypes, preferring the easier and less seditious task of presenting migrants as inert victims.

We bowled along, hooting at the antics and impostures of gurus and fakirs, from the Maharaji on. Only months ago, JP and Sainath told me, an up-and-coming swami, Sri-Sri Ravisander, had headed into southern Tamil Nadu, vowing to project his spiritual powers to those afflicted by the tsunami of December 26, 2004 and soothe the cosmic forces. The bigwigs of the local town assembled to greet the great mystic.

But as his cavalcade of 70 cars rolled south along the highway down the coast of Coromandel some subversive wag raised the cry that a second tsunami, even more immense in destructive potential than the first, was just over the horizon. The swami made a quick estimate of the his powers versus those of the cosmic forces and ordered his car to turn round.

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The road was narrow and the ensuing jam very terrible to behold as Sri-Sri Ravisanker tried to beat a retreat.

March 28

At 9.30 pm JP, Sainath and I head for Nehru U for my big talk. They drive round the campus reminiscing about the good old days when they hosted Iranian students protesting the Shah's visit and JP managed to get onto the roof of the car behind the Shah's. The next day JP brings a black and white photo and there he is, a blurry, bearded protester. I ask when the police didn't beat him to death with their *lathis* – bamboo staves – and he said that they circled him and began to whack away, but the staves clashed above his body, as in a cartoon, and he was able to roll away and flee.

The venue is the mess hall of one of the hostels. At ten Sainath gives me a generous intro and I'm off on my scheduled talk, "War on Iraq, War in America". I go at it for about an hour, throwing everything into the pot, from Judith Miller to Abu Ghraib, to the failures of the American left. It goes down well, and questions are vigorous including a fellow who asks about the neocons and their origins in a Trotskyite groupuscule headed by Schachtman. I confirm the story and the questioner, obviously a Maoist, grins with knowing approval. The Trotskyites furrow their brows.

April 2

After a few more days in Delhi and Mumbai, we fly to the south-west, land in Tamil Nadu and drive over the state line into Kerala and visit a Coca Cola plant blockaded by peasants since it has destroyed their water supplies. Then we head on down into Kerala, ending up in Khozikode, aka Calicut, (a few miles from where Vasco da Gama made landfall in 1498) where I give a press conference under the aegis of *Mathrubhumi,* the million-plus circulation newspaper daily, published in Kerala's language, Malayalam (spoken by70 million).

After a while a fellow stands up and asks me if the CIA is active on American campuses. I allude in my response to recent pieces in *CounterPunch* about the new Roberts program, covertly funding graduates for intelligence work. He persists. Is it not a fact, he asks, that Professor Franke, at the state university at Montclair in New Jersey, is working with the CIA.

Scenting trouble, I immediately respond to the effect that I have absolutely zero knowledge of Franke or of what goes on at Montclair, including any possible CIA activity. The chap nods happily and sits down. A few days later I get an urgent email from Richard Franke in Montclair. Sainath and I and the fellows from *Mathrubhumi,* traveling in Wyanad, have missed a story in the ultra Hindu nationalist paper run by the RSS, stating that "Cockburn confirms CIA presence at Montclair". Franke, apparently an excellent anthropologist, is frantic to know exactly what I said. It turns out this is all part of a long rumor-mongering campaign of sabotage by left sectarians against Franke, who has played a creditable role in Kerala politics, and a local left leader, T.M. Thomas Isaac, State Secretariat member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), which as likely as not will be leading the government of Kerala after next year's elections

April 3

To meet India's rural crisis face to face we drive along the lovely wooded roads of Wyanad, a district in north eastern Kerala. To our east rise the Western Ghat mountains. Last night we stayed in Sultan's Battery, so called because it had been the last stand of the local sultan, when the British came three centuries ago.

Along this road the ancient forests have long since logged off and the state-planted young teak trees are usually cut, to judge by the piles at the side of the road, with the trunk at about 12" in diameter. Familiar follies of state sponsored forestry have occurred. Some years ago the clumps of bamboo, often forty feet across and fifty feet high, were taken off the ridges and slopes of the western Ghats and *Eucalyptus globulus* put in, the same way it was in California in the 1870s. Elephants don't like it because it replaces their natural habitat, and drives them out in search of forage. As the old forest was cut, the weather cycles in Wyanad changed for the worse, putting paid to the orange groves.

We turn off the road through the woods and onto a smaller lane, guides by the area rep of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), whose red flags and local offices are conspicuous throughout the district. Then we walk up a path past pepper vines, bananas, cashew trees, jackfruit and some coffee bushes to a single-story concrete block house. Here are Dinesan, two of his sisters and two little children. The mother and another sister are away. Dinesan has a job as a projectionist, though Wyanad's farm crisis means few can afford to go to the movies any more and so the local cinema is failing. The proprietor refuses to screen the skin movies now churning out of Indian studios.

The property is a house on three acres. Livestock: one cow, one goat. Nearly a year ago Dinesan's father B.M. Kamelasan, reviewed the collapsing price of pepper, vanilla and coffee, set the sums he'd borrowed from the banks and the money lenders against the expected yields and decided to end it all with the one agent he could get for free, a pesticide called monocrotophos made by Ciba-Geigy. It's a horrible way to die.

This is no tableau of beleaguered sharecroppers in a tar-paper shanty in West Virginia fifty years ago. The family is trim, the two kids clean and nicely dressed. A farmer's desperation and suicide do not require the backdrop of a rural slum, even though, after the collapse in agricultural prices, Dinesan and his family have their backs against the wall, with a mudslide of debt (tiny by western standards) engulfing them. Amid the terrible crisis of the small family farmers in the American Midwest in the past thirty years there have been plenty of suicides or, to put it more tactfully, higher than expected deaths, in trim ranch houses, where the suicide might be reported as accidental death so the survivors get the insurance money.

Kerala has 100 per cent literacy and a tradition of voracious newspaper reading. The libraries are stuffed with poor people catching up on local and world events. Young Dinesan talks about the reasons for the crisis, the collapse of subsidies, the role of middlemen, the World Bank's subsidy to Vietnam whose cheap and inferior pepper comes to Sri Lanka, a free port, and then into Kerala whose Malabar pepper is the finest in the world. As with most peasants and farmers across the world, he understands the world picture. He talks about the weakness of the dollar against the Euro.

An hour later it's time to go. The little boy climbs a cashew tree and brings me down a fruit with the large cashew shell growing out of its top. The fruit tastes a

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bit like mango. Cashews came from the New World via the Portuguese, along with chili, tapioca, tomatoes, pineapples, cocoa, potatoes and groundnuts. That was early globalization. It was quicker in those days. The first housewives on the Indian subcontinent got chilis, a basic for what we regard as the eternal Indian diet in about 1550, and not too long thereafter it was on every household menu in the whole of India.

In 1957, in free elections, the Communists swept to power in Kerala and delivered on their promise of land reform in a decade where U.S. dollars and the CIA leagued with the local land barons and international firms like United Fruit to crush it in Guatemala and Iran. The Communists delivered on land, on education and on health. By 1959, under US pressure, the central government in New Delhi struck, dismissing Kerala's government. The long counterattack followed, with brief interruptions by left coalitions. Kerala's still the most literate state in India. Its infant mortality rates are the lowest. Its schools are still good.

Last year Sainath wrote about a little girl whose father, working across the state line as a day laborer in Karnataka, scrapes the money together to send her back on the bus each day to get taught by the nuns in Wyanad, a devotion to his daughter's future all the more remarkable because it's a daughter, not a son he's sending back. Millions of Indian parents crave sons, not daughters. When the ultrasound picks up the evidence of a female embryo *in utero,* the parents all too often avail themselves of choice and abort that embryo.

Wyanad is a district caught in the backwash of "market freedoms. The Christian churches, who brought thousands of immigrants into Wyanad after World War 2 are in trouble, with their Sunday collections down to 10 per cent of normal. Priests aren't being paid, though bishops surely must be. Movie houses have closed down. There are less Tamil migrant laborers around and those that are can't afford the 10 rupee ticket.

At least the Kerala State Road Transport Corp's busses are doing a booming business, ferrying people looking for work in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. Thousands cross every day. Back in 95 there were six busses a day to Kutta, in Karnataka; now there are 24 daily. On them are skilled men, masons, carpenters, electricians. These are the people who worked on the half-built houses, many of them substantial villas, one sees mile after mile each side of Wyanad's rural roads, abandoned after farm income slid into the pit.

The state-licensed toddy shops are in trouble too. Toddy is a fermented brew from the sap of the palmyra palm. We visit Uttaman, the toddy man. He's a genial fellow, with the slightly knowing grin, redolent of tolerance for human folly, one often finds in barkeeps and kindred providers. Uttaman pays 48,000 rupees a year for his license, 100,000 rupees for the welfare fund for his six employees. These days they're tapping 120 liters of toddy a day. Five years ago he brewed and sold 250 bottles a day, today only 10 or 15. He's being ruined by arrack, a spirit distilled from fermented toddy that's illegal in Kerala but for sale just across the Kabini river in Karnataka. It's stronger, and because it's illegal and the distillers don't pay taxes, cheaper.

"You'll walk on water or I'll break your legs", Karanjia shouted. The trembling guru stepped off the edge of the tank and sank like a stone.

Uttaman offers me a glass of toddy. It's pleasant. He lets the toddy ferment for 12 hours, to get an alcohol content of 12 per cent. If he leaves it ferment for 24 hours, it will go to 24 per cent. It's got a shelf life of 48 hours. As I sip, Uttaman describes to us the visit from the cops after Sainath's piece on him was published in *The Hindu* in January. Why was he talking to Sainath, they asked him. Sainath was the man who'd personally overthrown Naidu, the chief minister of Andhra Pradesh. Sainath gives a gratified smirk.

April 4

Sainath tells me he's had difficulty sleeping since he covered the suicides in Andhra Pradesh from the late 90s on.

How did it all begin? From the early 90s forward, zero investment and a collapse of credit ravaged Indian agriculture. The landless poor saw working days crash as a result. Crippling rises in the costs of seed, fertilizer, utilities, pesticide and water crushed small farms. New user fees sent health costs soaring, and such costs have become a huge component of rural family debt. Newly commercialized education destroyed the hopes of hundreds of thousands of women, as families, given the narrowed options, favored sons over daughters. Farm kids simply dropped out.

Ruin metastasized. Sainath showed me an 8x10 picture he'd taken of a woman, Aruna, positioning a photograph of her husband Bangaru Ramachari among the implements he made for farmers, getting payment in kind. Amid the slump he'd no customers for two years. He'd died of hunger, too proud to admit, in his last week before he collapsed, that he'd not eaten for five days.

The shift from food crops to cash crops, backed by the World Bank, produced another harvest of disaster. New entrepreneurs replacing old government-run networks sold bad seeds that would not germinate.

"The suicides", Sainath says, "are a symptom of vast agrarian distress. For every farmer who has committed suicide there are thousands more facing the same huge crisis who have not taken their lives. In fact, we will never know how many suicides there have been, since there are so many ways of not counting them. We do know that in seven or eight states since '97 and '98 and most particularly since 2000 farmers have taken their lives by the thousand. In the single district of Anantapur, in the state of Andhra Pradesh, so beloved by the neoliberals because of its "reforms", over 3,000 farmers have taken their lives between 1997 and 2003.

Increasingly, from 1999-2000 Sainath and some vigilant local journalists noticed a mismatch between what they were seeing in the fields and the official data. Narasimha Reddy, who works for the biggest Telugu newspaper, *Eenadu* (with a circulation of around one million), started writing about this gap. The government stats were saying that suicides due to "distress" were no more than 54 statewide in 2000. This was strange because when Narasimha and Sainath went to villages to investigate suicides they'd routinely find six or seven. That rattled them. Then

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they started looking more closely at the death statistics, and they found out what the bureaucrats were doing, first as conspiracy, then out of habit.

The overwhelming method of suicide was by drinking pesticide dumped on farmers by the government. The journalists found that the police had listed these as "suicides due to stomach ache". Sometimes they said that the pain of the stomach ache "had prompted the victims to take pesticide".

Other methods of concealment included counting a death as suicide, but not a "distress" suicide. Or as an "accident". Or as a death due to natural causes or accident. Many of those killing themselves were women running small farms in the absence of husbands who were looking for work elsewhere, or who had taken their own lives. But because these women rarely owned the land themselves, they weren't classified as farmers, so their suicides were not counted as farm-related.

Then there's the stigma of suicide. Many families don't want it, and that's a big factor in suppressing the numbers. Again, legally speaking, post mortems are free, but to prove that a relative committed suicide the police extort money from family members to pay for the autopsy. Officials undercount suicides among dalits and landless laborers or among migrant farmers who've given up, gone to a town and, severed from their social setting, killed themselves.

While these farmers were being driven to suicide by the thousand in Andhra Pradesh, Chandrababu Naidu, the state's chief minister, was being iconized in the western press as the apex posterboy for neoliberal "reform". The *Wall Street Journal* hailed him as "a model for fellow state leaders". *Time* crowned him "South Asian of the year". Bill Gates called on Naidu. So did Bill Clinton. So did Paul O'Neill. John Wolfenson, president of the World Bank, tossed him loan upon loan.

The press projected onto Naidu all their fantasies of what a neoliberal modernizer should be, building an IT-based economy in "Cyberabad". Oppression of women? Naidu's fixed that, crowed *The Financial Times*: "In a country where lower caste women are locked out of decision-making, the government of Andhra Pradesh is sponsoring a social revolution…. Women now dominate the village square".

Indeed, World Bank officials clapped their hands as Naidu kicked aside the *panchayats* – democratic district councils – and announced he was empowering women in new local organizations. What could be wrong with that? Plenty. The new outfits usually turned out to be small coteries with the right connections, which got Naidu's patronage and which filched or wasted the money while the genuinely democratic village panchayats were sidelined and starved of funding. The collapse of democracy – that is, the framework for collective action to combat disaster – in the countryside contributed to the terrible harvest of death.

On December 27, 2002 Keith Bradsher of the *New York Times* issued a worshipful resume of Naidu's assets and achievements, selecting for particular mention the asset that Bradsher deemed vital to Naidu's political grip on Andhra Pradesh. "Naidu and his allies", Bradsher breathlessly confided to the NYT's readers, "speak Telugu, a language spoken only in this state and by a few people in two adjacent states". What Bradsher was saying was that Naidu spoke the same language as the other 70 million inhabitants of Andhra Pradesh. It was as though someone ascribed Tony Blair's political successes in the United Kingdom to his command of English.

Apart from Naidu's wondrous fluency in his native tongue, Bradsher fixed upon other achievements likely to excite an American business readership: "Mr. Naidu", he confides, "has succeeded in raising electricity prices here by 70 percent" and "has enacted a law requiring union leaders to be workers from the factory or office they represent…Andhra Pradesh has also relaxed some of the restrictions on laying off workers".

In the spring of 2004 the Naidu balloon exploded with a gigantic thunderclap. The Indian poor entered his field of vision decisively, even as they voters shattered the expectations of almost every national political pundit. Rarely has a posterboy been more humiliatingly peeled from the billboards and tossed in the gutter. Naidu's elected coalition plummeted from 202 seats to a quarter of that number. The verdict, from landless poor to farmers to rural women to the denizens of Cyberabad, was well nigh unanimous: the Naidu model had been a disaster for Andhra Pradesh, as statistics had been inexorably recording even during his glory years. Growth was abysmal and other vital statistics equally wretched. The 5,000 suicides remain the prime epitaph for a politician hailed in the West more than any other Indian as the harbinger of neoliberal triumph. Only the Argentinian collapse was as brutal a rebuff to elite opinion.

April 5

My big evening in Calicut, sponsored by the extremely militant Bank Clerks' Union. There's a full house, I'm glad to say, with Muslim clerics front row right, Hindu fundamentalists, secularist leftists, Christians of various stripes. Kerala is a third Muslim, a third Hindu and a third Christian the latter faith being brought to the Malabar coast in 60 AD by Thomas the Doubting Apostle, no doubt plaguing the navigator with anxious questions.

The meeting is chaired by the local member of the federal parliament, Veerendrakumar, an energetic man in his sixties who also controls Mathrubhumi. I let fly for an hour on the topic of the war in Iraq. It seems to go down well. Sainath speaks too, reminding the audience that back in 1916, when the British invaded Mesopotamia, their force was mostly Indian soldiers, most of whom were captured by the Turks and died in forced labor building railroads.

April 6

We drive north back to Wyanad, back to St. George's Battery for a last night, winding our way up to 3000 feet in the Western Ghats, then the next day with Sudhi at the wheel of the Ambassador we set off north again into the state of Karnataka, north east through Mysore to Bangalore, hailed by the Friedmans of this world as India's prime rendezvous with the future, where the cyber-coolies toil night and day in the huge call centers.

The Hindu's classifieds tell the story: "Call Center Placement based US/UK, req'd for Chennai and Blr, Sal up to Rs 1800/m, age 17 to 29.Any degree, walkin". "ACDA of Chennai wants to hire Part-time faculty to teach Accent Neutralisation and American Accent."

Later in *The Hindu* come the matrimonial classifieds. "Hindu Parkaakulam, Moopanaar/Udayar 23/167, B.A. Fine Arts, doing MA MASSCOMM, goodlooking, wheatish complexion, girl from well-to-do family in business seeks well settled groom in business. Early mar-

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riage. Send horoscope/photo."

And on down the packed columns to "Karkatha Pillai 30/MCA/employed in TNEB seeks employed guy of same caste". These were all from the Tamil section, with others allocated to Marathi, Bengali and "Cosmopolitan" where we find "K—, 33/155/fair MNC innocent divorcee. Brahmin 35-38 preferably Hyd/Abroad without encumbrances", plus an e-address @yahoo and a box address at *The Hindu* in Chennai.

Sainath says such references to innocence – frequent in the matrimonial classifieds – are intended to convey the fact that the advertiser is still a virgin. Since some of the male matrimonials also mention innocence in divorce I'd assumed this meant simply that the advertiser was claiming to be the injured party.

In this edition of *The Hindu* there are five pages of such classified like "Karkatha Vellala B. Tech. 27/175, software engineer, Wikpro Bangalore at present Belgium, parents seek proposals from Diploma/Degree holders fair-looking vegetarian of upper middle class willing to go abroad, send biodata with horoscope". Would that American parents were so prudent. Who wants to end up with a mismatch in the zodiac?

These matrimonial ads aren't on the fringe of the national culture, but in its dead center, as is the poor situation of Indian women overall. Most Indian marriages are arranged, from poor up to wealthy families. Of course there are love marriages and these days some Indian women find a way out of parental pressure to marry, via prolonged stints of education abroad in the USA, UK or Australia.

I passed an ad on a wall for "parrot readings". I thought this was a misprint for Tarot, but no. Apparently the parrot's handler lays out the Tarot pack, the parrot takes a sideways squint at the customer and then does a power point presentation with his beak. Maybe Sainath was pulling my leg but the sign definitely did say parrot, and I've known some pretty smart parrots in my time.

Bangalore may be the modern face of India, but it's paralysed by traffic. Nothing moves. International businesses are having to relocate into the hinterland. There is, so our host Ashwin Mahesh tells us genially, no central traffic authority. Ashwin, ex-NASA researcher, educated at UW, then with a stint at NASA's Goddard Center under his belt, returned to India to run a fine, public interest website, indiatogether. From the 16th floor of South Tower, where he and his wife lives, we are well situated to review the grid-locked traffic. Ashwin has already modeled some ideas for traffic relief which are under consideration.

April 7

Chennai. Here I am on the coast of Coromandel. At last a city with the feel and pace of an older time. We go to the guest house of the Asian School of Journalism. I give a talk to the students. Then off to a terrific Chettinad restaurant, though in my order I foolishly include curried partridge, which is disappointing as all partridges have been for the 40 years since I ate a good one, braised in whiskey and cream. I drive around with Ashwin, who's come from Bangalore to visit his parents. We drive through the Theosophy Canter, the sanctuary of Annie Besant, also of a banyan of international repute, though now dying. Then we pace about on what is officially classified as the third longest beach in the world. There aren't many women, and no one in bathing dress.

The great tsunami of last Christmas washed in over this beach and about 3/4ths of a km inland, with a total of 40 lives or so lost in all of Chennai.

April 8

We go down to a heritage center south of Chennai called Dakshina Chitra, which is really good, with excellent reconstructions of vernacular Indian architecture of an earlier time in Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Looking at the wooden buildings reminds me of how much Indian architecture of the past fifty years is truly awful.

I distinguish architecture here from landscape. Indian landscapes, whether rural or urban are certainly "thick", just as most American landscapes are "thin". In India, from a foot in front of one's nose to the horizon, there are infinite medleys of planes and perspectives. There is no thin air, no emptiness. There's the street life, the endless small shop displays and signage, the billboards above, the animals, the stalls, the cars and busses overtaking each other at 60 miles an hour.

The overall effect is endlessly inspiriting, with palette after palette of tumultuous greens, blues, yellows, pinks and reds deployed on saris, racks of clothes, aging advertisements. Someone who is tired of an Indian streetscape or country road is truly tired of life. But the architecture itself is mostly drab cinderblock. The moving spirit of Dakshina Chitra, an American woman called Deborah Thiagarajan (she is married to a Chettinad businessman), puts it very well in her essay on domestic architecture in Tamil Nadu (in an excellent little book, *Traditional and Vernacular Architecture*, published by the Madras Craft Foundation):

"By the early 1950s the whole urban architecture scene had changed. Trained Indian architects were beginning to emerge on the scene. In the expanding cities there was no looking back to any form or more traditional Indian architecture or to the culturally more dynamic forms of public architecture such as the so-called Indo Saracenic architecture of Madras that flowered in public spaces in the last part of the nineteenth century.

Chandrababu Naidu, Andhra Pradesh's chief minister, was iconized in the western press as the apex posterboy for neoliberal "reform".

"The introduction of cement into India in approximately 1933, coupled with the increased availability of steel, unleashed a new aesthetic and range of architectural use. Lime began to be phased out and practically died out in the cities by the 1950s. The new material was a craze, but not one which was used well. There was a total confusion among Indian architects and they produced a full generation of faceless, characterless architecture in the 1960s, 70s and early 80s.

"Indian architects and the Indian schools of architecture in the South failed the public. The quote by a famous civil servant, Gurusaday Dutt, from Bengal at the turn of the century says it all: 'The education that Calcutta University imparted in those days taught me to consider every old value or form in the country as

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a product of barbarism or superstition'."

Most Indian domestic interiors that I saw were not uplifting, indeed often tasteless, and seemed to have very little connection to the richness of India's older architectural past. Indeed the new Hindu temples, erupting with high-relief polychrome processions of gods, humans and beasts were a joy after the etiolated modernism that passes for cutting edge design. Sainath disagrees strongly. Every new temple to him means another advance of Hindu ultra-nationalism, religious intolerance, the persistence of caste. "But Sainath", I argue, "in a couple of centuries these Hindu temples will look wonderful, even to your eyes". But he'll have none of it and sternly lead me off to the admittedly wonderful eighth-century monolithic temples south of Madras at Mahabalipuram.

April 10

I give a talk on the war in Iraq. There's a fine turnout and many questions. N. Ram, the editor in chief of *The Hindu*, which sponsored the event, is unable to attend, with the rather good excuse that he was meeting the Chinese prime minister, Wen Jibao, touring Bangalore and Chennai that week.

The Hindu, circulation a million plus, and now Sainath's home port, maintains decent standards and reminds me somewhat of the London *Times* thirty years ago, when a salvo from the editorial page could alter the contours of a whole political battlefield. Ram invites Sainath and me to drop by his house in Chennai the next day, and we do so. When we arrive his charming wife says that he cannot be with us for a few minutes because he is finishing his editorial on China-Indian relations.

She says this with a tinge of gravity, of reverence for the solemn rite of editorial composition that take me back to the distant years in the 60s when the presses at The London *Times* would be held while the editor in chief, William Haley, wrestled unrighteousness to the ground in the "first leader", as the prime editorial was called in England in those days. These days editorials count for nothing in the US. Few read them except for press secretaries and lobbyists. They have no weight.

In due course Ram emerges from his editorial labors, looking weighty, and treats us to an interesting disquisition, which I correctly assess to be the burden of his impending editorial, on the evolution of Chinese-Indian relations since the late 40s.

Then he shifts to a description of his shock when he was attending the reunion of his class of 68 of the Columbia Journalism School last year and at a meeting to discuss the burning issues of the day he heard not a word of condemnation of the US invasion of Iraq, so rose to his feet and denounced it himself. He said there were several hisses from other J School grads.

It was bracing to find a newspaper editor – probably India's premier editor in terms of political clout – talking like that; bracing too to hear later that in his younger days Ram endorsed a strike at *The Hindu* and was promptly exiled from *The Hindu's* premises by his father, then the newspaper's boss.

Apparently the parrot's handler lays out the Tarot pack, the parrot takes a sideways squint at the customer and then does a power point presentation with his beak.

April 11

Back to Mumbai. Sainath's friend Sudarshan invites me to Apne-Aap, a foundation he runs, in Kamathipura, Mumbai's red light district along the Falkland Road. The Foundation has some rooms in an old school, and these are now filled with cheerful kids. The idea is to give children of prostitutes a chance to get out of the life, get some education, get a chance. It's the dearest dream of the prostitutes, many of whom haven't much hope of living past 35, taken off by AIDS or TB. The women working at the drop-in house get the prostitutes ration cards, take them to hospital, run savings accounts – over 200 when I was there - for them where they can squirrel away ten rupees (25 cents) or so a day for their kids. Without such help the prostitutes get turned away by hospitals and kindred bureaucracies. Already there are 150 kids who've graduated, and 65 currently in attendance. Only one graduate has gone into her mother's line of business. I like the atmosphere, mercifully free of social worker sanctimony. Apne-Aap's staff, Manju Vyas, Preethi, Diplai and Bimbla, are all in good spirits and enormously impressive.

We walk over to a huge old brothel built by the British a hundred years ago for their garrison. Back then the prostitutes were Tibetan or Japanese. These days they're from Nepal or Bangladesh. The middlemen procuring the girls from their parents get 20,000 rupees or more from the madams. The rooms in the brothel are about 10 foot by 10 foot, with two tiers of beds and families of four five cooking and chatting. When a customer shows up and forks over his 50 rupees they presumably stand outside. The girls greet us in friendly style and some of them covertly slide over their ten rupees to the Aapne-Aap women, out of sight of husband, or pimp, or madam. It costs residents 50 rupees a day to rent a bed. Five rupees buy you a bucket of water. Electricity costs 150 rupees a month.

After an hour or so I bid them adieu and go off to the Royal Yacht Club to read for an hour or two before Sainath and his wife Sonya Gill throw me a farewell dinner. Three weeks earlier Sainath has given me Rajani Palme Dutt's *India Today*, in a revised edition put out in 1970, not long before he died. The first edition had been commissioned by Victor Gollancz, of Left Book Club fame, who was so terrified of being charged with sedition that he forced Palme Dutt to blue pencil many passages, including excision of all references to revolution, including the phrase "industrial revolution".

In his years on the *Daily Worker*, my father knew Palme Dutt well when the latter was the prime theoretician and intellectual commissar of the British Communist Party. If you skip the predictable boilerplate and ideological postures to be expected of a CP high-up in the 1940s, *India Today* is an absorbing history and a corrective to any nostalgia for

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the days or the Raj, or to the current nonsense about its benign role purveyed by such choristers of Empire as Niall Ferguson.

In an early chapter Palme Dutt cites admiring travelers such as Tavernier, traveling around India in the seventeenth century, remarking that "even in the smallest villages rice, flour, butter, milk, beans and other vegetables, sugar and other sweetmeats, dry and liquid, can be procured in abundance". Many travelers at the time extolled Bengal as marvelous in the abundance of its resources, the advanced nature of its crafts.

By the 1920s, after nearly two centuries of British rule, India was a byword for the vast abyss of its all-pervading poverty. "The average Indian income", wrote two economists in 1924, "is just enough either to feed two men in every three of the population, or give them all two in place of every three meals they need, on condition they all consent to go naked, live out of doors all the year round, have no amusement or recreation, and want nothing else but food, and that the lowest, the coarsest, the least nutritious".

The British devastation of India was initially achieved by the simple means of taxing it into destitution. In the last year of the last Indian ruler of Bengal, in 1764-5, the land revenue realized was 817,000 pounds sterling. Within a few years of British rule the population had shrunk by one-third through famine, in which ten million perished in 1770 and a third of the country into "a jungle inhabited by wild beasts".

Nonetheless, by 1771-2 the Bengal revenues had risen to 2,341,000 pounds sterling. As Warren Hastings reported to the Court of the Directors of the East India Company in 1772 with bracing frankness, "Notwithstanding the loss of at least one-third of the inhabitants of the province, and the consequent decrease of the cultivation, the net collections of the year 1771 exceeded even those of 1768… It was naturally to be expected that the diminution of the revenue should have kept an equal pace with the other consequences of so great a calamity. That it did not was owing to its being violently kept up to its former standard".

The British destroyed the old manufacturing towns and the economy of the villages. In Palme Dutt's words, "The millions of ruined artisans and craftsmen, spinners, weavers, potters, smelters, smiths, alike from the towns and the villages, had no alternative save to crowd into agriculture"... India was "forced to the status of agricultural colony of British manufacturing capitalism", whose ideologues then invoked Malthus to explain India's degraded condition.

The Gateway to India, outside my window, slowly became a silhouette in the twilight, as families settled down in its shadow for the night. I put Palme Dutt's book down and prepared to leave for Sainath and Sonya's apartment.

As we wait for friends to arrive, Sainath reminds me of the bit in Tacitus' *Annals* where he describes how condemned people were recruited to serve as candles at Nero's parties: "they were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as nightly illumination when daylight had expired. Nero offered his gardens for the spectacle". "What sort of sensibility", Sainath broods, "did it require to pop another fig in your mouth as one more human being went up in flames?"

And by the same token, Sainath asks what sort of indifference has it required for India's rich – and the very rich in India are the among the richest on the planet – to disport while millions starved not far off, and thousands of peasants killed themselves, some of them less than 50 miles from Mumbai where much of India's wealth is concentrated, and where "theme weddings" costing millions have been the rage.

Last year an Indian steel billionaire, Lakshmi Mittal, and his wife Usha promised their daughter Vanisha a spectacular wedding. They cashed the promise by renting Vaux le Vicomte and Versailles in France for the nuptials. The six-day long wedding bash cost over $80 million and was attended by more than 1,200 guests including leading Indian industrialists and celebrities from the Bollywood film scene.

Just as interesting, I remark to Sainath, as the festivities and excesses of the rich is the mindset of the policy makers, the intellectual formulators of neoliberal policies that they know well will cause terrible suffering. What processes of self-exculpation insulate them from a policy (say, planned shrinkage of India's small farmers by 40 per cent) and the execution of that policy, inflicting terrible privations and early death on millions.

When I got back to the US I picked up in a second hand bookstore in Olympia, Washington, a history of the neoliberal antecedent to what has been happening in India and much of the Third World these last thirty years, as recorded in J.L. and Barbara Hammond's books *The Village Labourer*, and *The Town Labourer*, originally published in 1911 and 1917 respectively, the first set dedicated to Gilbert Murray. I got them in beautiful little Guild paperback editions published in the late 1940s. I'd often seen them cited by E.P. Thompson and others, but never read them. They're marvelous histories, giving clear and vivid accounts of how "enclosures" actually worked and the horrors they caused in eighteenth and nineteenth-century England. A local aristocrat, reeling under his gambling debts, simply sent in a petition to Parliament that the lands he had in mind (say, three or four villages all previously held under the common field system) simply become his. His request was duly reviewed by his cronies, often including his creditors, and through it sailed. Though later the petition had to be put up on the church door, initially the first the villagers might hear about it was when their new landlord apprised them of what they had lost and he had gained.

Then the Hammonds trace the evictions, the repressions, and ultimately trans-

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portation to Australia. "The nightmare that punishment was growing gentle and attractive to the poor came to haunt the mind of the governing class. It was founded on the belief that as human wretchedness was increasing, there was a sort of law of Malthus, by which human endurance tended to outgrow the resources of repression".

Transportation to Australia wasn't enough. The poor might see that as relief. The hell of transportation had to be augmented by the penal settlements (reduplicated in the Andamans, where the British sent Indian nationalists, mostly to certain death).

"And this system", the Hammonds wrote, was not the invention of some Nero or Caligula; it was the system imposed by men of gentle and refined manners, who talked to each other in the language of Virgil and Lucan, liberty and justice, who admired the sensibility of Euripides and Plutarch, who put down the abominations of the Slave Trade, and allowed Clive and Warren Hastings to be indicted at the bar of public opinion; and it was imposed by them from the belief that as the poor were becoming poorer, only a system of punishment that was becoming more brutal could deter them from crime".

The English peasantry was destroyed. Thanks to the Great Revolution the French peasantry survived. The Indian peasantry survives too. Sainath once wrote a little series of five marvelous vignettes of leaders of five rural rebellions against the British. As he emphasizes, the Indian rebellions were above all rural, starting with the great rebellions of May, 1857.

India became independent on August 15, 1947, after nearly two centuries of colonial rule. There was not a day the villages were quiet in that period. What the Brits call 'The Sepoy Mutiny' of 1857, was actually the greatest agrarian uprising the world had seen, at least until China got into the act.

The uprising of 1857 came when the villages exploded. The 'sepoy' (a British corruption of the Indian sipahi or soldier) was simply a peasant in uniform, who could not but reflect the mood of his village. For instance, in the province of Oudh, where there was great anger at the new land revenue system imposed by the British, almost every agricultural family had a representative in the army.

When the rural masses rose in millions, the business elite of Bombay and Calcutta held prayers – for the success of the British in quelling the rebellion! This is not to say that there was no revolt in the cities. Just that the explosion was from the villages and towns and that the elites – just as they are today – are on the wrong side. The big difference a city-based Gandhi made to the freedom struggle was bringing the rural masses into the organized political process on the scale he did. With that, Gandhi converted the Congress from a tea party into a political party. The entry of the millions of rural Indians is what made the difference.

"Through these decades", as Sainath says, "the rural poor have kept democracy alive in India. They go out and change governments. The backbone has always been rural".

And it still is.

Since the early to mid-70s the bandwagon of neoliberalism has been rolling along. I think we're due a history of the whole disastrous arc since 1973 till today. The 1970s saw capital's victorious counterattack on plans for a new world economic order, and more equitable commodity pricing. By the end of the decade the crucial UN agencies such as UNCTAD were well on their way to the sidelines.

As the postwar boom peaked and began to subside capital began to inflict upon the planet's face the new arrangements, amid whose baneful consequence millions today endure or sink beneath their weight. Public assets were seized and looted in the name of "liberalization" and "reform", internal markets taken by storm, economies devastated by free trade.

Out there in the real world of poor farmers on the lip of ruin, the neoliberal model imposed by the World Bank and by infatuated "reformers" across the world over the past twenty years has failed decisively, just as it has across so much of Latin America and the Third World. Let us dare to hope that across the next generation we will welcome a gathering counterattack on neoliberalism and a new path, along which scouting parties and bold detachments are already on the march. CP

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